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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA, DRL

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SUBJECT: Sri Lanka goes to the polls: Situation is calm nationwide with few reports of violence

Refs: (A) Colombo - Ops Center 04-02-04 telecon  
- (B) FBIS Reston VA DTG 020124Z Apr 04  
- (C) Colombo 572, and previous  
- (D) Oslo 575

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Sri Lankans flocked to the polls April 2 to elect a new Parliament. The situation throughout the country -- including the often volatile north and east -- is reportedly calm and there have been few reports of violence. Turnout seems high. Polls have now closed and results will begin to dribble in late April 2. A clear picture of the winners and the losers should emerge on April 3. Although it is too early to assess with finality the freeness and fairness of the election, indications appear mainly on the positive side at this point. Late reports raise questions about Tamil Tiger activities, including possible fraud, however. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) SRI LANKA VOTES: Sri Lankans flocked to the polls April 2 to elect a new Parliament. Polling stations, which were open from 7:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m., are now closed. Turnout appears to have been high. (Turnout may match the 75 percent recorded in the last parliamentary election in December 2001, but there are no firm figures as of yet.) Based on what the ten Mission teams scattered around the country reported, crowds lining up at polling stations to vote seemed enthusiastic. Monitors from the European Union and the Commonwealth reported to us that they were also struck by the apparent orderliness of the voting process. Representatives of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) have also been out and about and report that they have seen no anomalies.

3. (SBU) SITUATION BASICALLY PEACEFUL: Overall, election day appears to have been largely peaceful. (If this assessment holds up, it is contrary to past patterns in Sri Lanka: over 12 people were killed on election day in December 2001, for example.) Some minor acts of violence were reported, but nothing major has been reported as of yet (reports from rural areas can be slow to trickle in, however). There was a large presence of security forces throughout the country, especially in the always volatile north and east (see paras 5-6). Kingsley Rodrigo, the head of the People's Alliance for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), a local NGO with thousands of election monitors stationed nationwide, told poloff that it had been "a remarkably peaceful election," based on the reports he had heard thus far. P. Saravanamuttu, the head of the Center for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV), another NGO, told us that his organization had yet to pick up reports of "serious violence." (The election-related activities of PAFFREL and CMEV are partially funded by USAID.)

4. (SBU) It is uncertain whether or not the GSL plans to impose a national curfew the night of April 2. The imposition of a curfew has been a fixture after past elections, as the GSL worked to prevent tensions from getting out of hand during the sensitive counting of the ballots stage of the electoral process. RSO understands that the police -- taking into account the generally peaceful nature of the voting -- are reviewing the matter and the GSL will make a determination later in the day.

5. (C) NORTH/EAST APPEARS MAINLY QUIET: Voting in Sri Lanka's north and east also appears to have proceeded peacefully. Father Harry Miller, an Amcist Catholic priest (please protect), told poloff that Batticaloa District was "quite peaceful with no problems reported." (Amid reports of an imminent face-off between rival northern and eastern elements of the Tamil Tigers, and the March 30 assassination of a Tamil candidate, Batticaloa has been the scene of significant tension in

recent days -- see Reftels.) Mission team in Jaffna also reported that the situation was quiet. The Norwegian-run Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) told poloff that its monitors had heard of no problems in the north and east. (The SLMM has a staff of some 60 monitors from Nordic countries observing the ceasefire.)

16. (SBU) In the meantime, it appears that Tamils living in areas controlled by the Tigers were allowed to vote without too much hindrance at sites set up on the border between Tiger- and GSL-controlled areas in the north and east. A significant tie-up in traffic developed, however, as these voters lined up at military checkpoints before being allowed access to the polling stations. Government security forces, however, were apparently quite helpful in allowing voters through and there were no reports of Tamils being harassed or prevented from voting (see below re Tamil Tiger activities, however). Mission team in Vavuniya, a border town located just south of the Tiger-controlled Vanni region, reported that voting appeared to be going relatively smoothly in the area. (The apparent ease with which Tamils from Tiger-controlled areas voted this time around is a marked shift: the Sri Lankan military, acting on orders from the President's office, prevented tens of thousands of Tamils from voting in December 2001.)

17. (C) LATE REPORTS RE TIGERS: Late in the day, press reports cited V. Anandasangaree, a candidate and longtime MP, as accusing the Tigers of engaging in "massive rigging" and "voter impersonation" in Jaffna. (Anandasangaree, a close Mission contact, is a dedicated opponent of the Tigers.) There were also unconfirmed reports that Tiger personnel might be acting in a coercive manner near polling stations located near the Vanni/Vavuniya border and that these personnel might be impersonating voters on the rolls. We will sort out these reports in the days ahead.

18. (SBU) RESULTS TO DRIBBLE IN LATER: The next step in the process is the counting of the ballots. The tabulation of results is a very slow process in Sri Lanka. The first results will begin to be announced late April 2 -- postal ballots will be the first counted and those results released at around 9:30 p.m. The counting of votes will continue overnight, and a clear picture of winners and losers should emerge by mid-day April 3. If the election is particularly close, however, it may take additional time to size up the exact configuration of the next Parliament.

19. (C) COMMENT: The April 2 election was the first held in Sri Lanka during peacetime conditions in over 20 years (the ongoing peace process began in December 2001 right after the last parliamentary election). Based on what we are hearing so far, Sri Lankans can congratulate themselves -- the electoral process seems to have gone relatively smoothly and peacefully, thus far. That said, it is too early to assess with finality the freeness and fairness of the election. Counting the votes has not even begun (this is an area where there have been some fraud problems in the past). Moreover, local and foreign monitors have expressed concern about the degree of intimidation in the north and east meted out by the Tigers during the campaign. (As flagged above, there are also claims that the Tigers have been active on election day in various fraudulent activities.) The Election Commissioner is expected to give his initial assessment as to the free and fair nature of the election late April 2. Local and foreign monitors are slated to do the same April 2-3. END COMMENT.

110. (U) Minimize considered.

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